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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001136

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GOL OUTLINES PLAN FOR REBUILDING NAHR
AL-BARID

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The government official responsible for the issue of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Ambassador Khalil Makkawi, outlined the GOL's plan to deal with the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp once the Lebanese Armed Forces' battle against Fatah al-Islam militants is over. Makkawi is aware of the potential for finger-pointing and criticisms of the government immediately after the cessation of violence, but he is optimistic this could provide the GOL a real opportunity to rebuild the camp as a model living space. Makkawi seems very confident about his ability to control the story and the pace of rebuilding, but he faces significant challenges. End Summary.

The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC)

2. (U) Pol/Econ Chief and Special Assistant met with Ambassador Makkawi on July 26 to discuss the GOL's plans for rebuilding Nahr al-Barid after hostilities there end. Makkawi's title is President of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee and explained that the Lebanese cabinet established the organization at Prime Minister Siniora's urging in October 2005. It includes representatives from the ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, National Defense, Social Affairs, Labor, Public Health and Interior. Ambassador Mohamad Chatah, Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister, is also a member. The LPDC is the focal point within the GOL for long-term policy and planning for Lebanese-Palestinian relations.

3. (C) Makkawi outlined the three main priorities of the LPDC:

-- improve the human condition of Palestinian refugees living inside and outside of refugee camps in Lebanon, in conjunction with UNRWA (UN Relief and Works Agency);

-- initiate a dialogue to deal with the problem of arms inside and outside of the refugees camps;

-- establish formal relations with the official representative of the Palestinian people, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Makkawi said that the GOL was following the Arab League's decision to recognize the PLO. According to Makkawi, the LPDC has no intention of getting

involved with internal Palestinian politics and will continue to deal with the PLO until the Arab League reconsiders the PLO's status. Makkawi has been pleased with the level of cooperation and coordination with the PLO to date.

¶4. (SBU) Makkawi stressed that the GOL was committed to keeping its word and to improving the conditions for refugees in tangible ways. He said that progress has been made, citing a successful April 2006 donors conference that raised \$27 million to rebuild infrastructure in the camps. He stated that this was an important beginning in an effort to correct problems which have existed for 60 years.

LPDC's Initial Reaction to Nahr al-Barid

¶5. (C) The LPDC decided to form three new committees when fighting broke out in Nahr al-Barid. They are:

-- The Communications Committee: This was established to improve public awareness about the current situation. Makkawi said the core message for the Palestinians has been that their departure from Nahr al-Barid will only be temporary. The GOL has pledged to rebuild the camp and allow residents to return. However, Makkawi also added that the committee has tried to temper expectations. He has publicly stated for weeks that no refugee will be allowed to reenter the camp until demining teams have certified the area as safe. This message has also been repeated in written pamphlets which have been distributed in the shelters. (Note: Makkawi helped to create the National Demining Office following the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 and worked on the issue for five years. End Note.)

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-- The Relief Emergency Committee: The LPDC has created this committee in conjunction with the UN, the International Red Cross, the Lebanese Red Cross, the Palestinian Red Crescent and other relief organizations. According to Makkawi, this committee meets 3-4 times per week with the Prime Minister and oversees the distribution of food, medical supplies and financial aid. The Prime Minister's High Relief Council is also involved in the distribution of this assistance. Makkawi stated that eight public schools have been opened as shelters for approximately 30,000 refugees and three hot meals a day are being served. He is committed to returning the refugees to permanent shelter before these schools reopen to students in September.

-- The Post-Conflict Committee: A top priority for the LPDC will be to survey the damage and to conduct a needs assessment for the reconstruction of Nahr al-Barid and the surrounding areas that have been damaged by the fighting. While a consulting firm, Khatib and Alami, has been hired to advise on this assessment, Makkawi wants the World Bank, in conjunction with UNRWA, to lead the effort. Makkawi seemed assured that this report will be prepared in 2-4 weeks time and that international donors will give great credence to a World Bank report.

Immediate Challenges

¶6. (C) There will be legal issues to consider during the reconstruction phase. Makkawi stated that the old portion of the camp, where the most recent fighting has occurred, has historically been under UNRWA control and it should be easy to turn it back over to that organization for reconstruction. However, the 'new camp' in the north of Nahr al-Barid is built on land that has contested legal status. There are Lebanese citizens who claim to have deeds and ownership rights over this portion of the land, and Makkawi acknowledges that these issues will have to be resolved by legal experts. (Comment: That is not a good sign, as it could slow the reconstruction process for years. The GOL

promised the refugees that they could return to a rebuilt Nahr al-Barid - not just the old camp. Unless the whole camp is rebuilt quickly, the GOL will be seen as breaking its word. End Comment.)

¶7. (C) Makkawi also admitted that there will be political sensitivities during the rebuilding effort. Many Lebanese families displaced by the 2006 conflict with Israel are still waiting for their homes to be rebuilt and will be watching to see that the GOL approaches reconstruction for the Palestinian displaced from Nahr al-Barid in an equitable manner. This could easily become a divisive issue within the country and may be used to discredit the government.

Opportunities for Change

¶8. (C) Makkawi envisions a camp that is rebuilt as a model for other camps in the country. He considers it important to manage overcrowding and to create more green space. He also wants to "start from scratch" to ensure that Nahr al-Barid remains under Lebanese sovereign control. There should be no more reasons or excuses for the presence of armed Palestinian militia forces inside or outside the camp.

¶9. (C) Makkawi wants to then expand the features of this model camp to others in Lebanon to improve the way of life of Palestinians. "You have to make the best of a bad situation and give these people a better life." He mentioned that Palestinians are pushing for the right to hold professional jobs within Lebanon. This is impossible under the current law and it will take a new government to change it.

¶10. (C) Makkawi asked for donor nations to be generous and swift with their contributions. The situation in Lebanon is unique, in his opinion, and the stakes are higher here. Makkawi asked us to pass the message that direct donations to one international fund would be preferable to individual piece-meal projects which could take longer.

Comment

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¶11. (C) On the margins of a separate July 27 meeting, SpecAsst briefly spoke with Dr. Sateh Arnout, Advisor to the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister for economic reform. He has also been tasked to work on an International Donors Trust Fund to rebuild Nahr al-Barid and rehabilitate the other camps. When SpecAsst mentioned her meeting with Ambassador Makkawi, Arnout rolled his eyes a bit and said, "Makkawi's been a one man show for a long time. We need to bolster that office and we need to do it now."

¶12. (C) Makkawi seemed fairly confident in his ability to manage both time and expectations. We are skeptical given the challenges he described. We suspect that once the fighting stops and the current strong sense of unity behind the Lebanese Armed Forces fades, finger pointing at the government will begin over the pace of rebuilding and returning refugees to Nahr al-Barid.

¶13. (C) Indeed, there is no good or easy answer with what to do with the displaced Palestinian refugees, especially given intense Lebanese hatred of the Palestinians (traditionally seen as the instigators of Lebanon's civil war, a convenient way for the Lebanese to evade blame themselves). PM Siniora and his cabinet are thus in a no-win situation: by spending money and effort to rebuild what is supposed to be a temporary camp, GOL officials will inevitably be accused of favoring Palestinians over Lebanese still displaced by last summer's war. Undoubtedly Christian opposition politicians like Michel Aoun will point their fingers at reconstruction efforts to accuse Siniora et al. of

the grievous sin of "tawteen," the much-feared permanent implantation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (long rumored to be a Sunni plot to increase the Sunni demographic weight).

But while it seems ludicrous or even politically dangerous to rebuild the camp, the alternatives are even worse: Leaving 30,000 angry Palestinians in overcrowded Beddawi camp is a security nightmare, fertile ground for Palestinian rejectionist activity. Trying to disburse the displaced refugees throughout Lebanon would also provoke accusations of "tawteen."

¶14. (C) To us, PM Makkawi's sunny idealism regarding a model refugee camp is rooted more in naivete than realism. Rebuilding Nahr al-Barid, unfortunately the only realistic option on the table, will not be easy, quick, cheap, or politically attractive for those involved. Undoubtedly, presidential politics will come into play, too: LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, in charge of the army that leveled the camp, will be played up as someone who, after 60 years, was courageous enough to remove one of the cancers on the Lebanese landscape. PM Siniora, by contrast, will be painted with the brush of "tawteen." When the guns fall at last fall silent at Nahr al-Barid, with the Lebanese state for once victorious over the forces of terrorism, the real political battles will begin.

FELTMAN